

# Women still face struggle to win places in pulpit

By Ed Golder  
Press Religion Editor

Visiting Rome with then-Grand Rapids Bishop Joseph Breitenbeck, Sister Patrice Konwinski was going to have her picture taken with Pope John Paul II and a group of Catholic bishops from the United States. One of only a handful of U.S. nuns to act as chief administrator of a diocese, Konwinski had elicited an enthusiastic response from the pontiff when introduced in the traditional papal greeting line.

As the photographer set up the picture, the pope raised his hand, stopped everything and asked: "Where is the sister chancellor?" A sea of red and black robes parted to reveal the diminutive nun. The Pope smiled and pointed to the spot on his right — the Italian place of honor. That's where Konwinski stood when the camera flashed.



For Konwinski, a Dominican nun appointed chancellor in the Catholic Diocese of Grand Rapids diocese two years ago, the brief scene underscored the present Catholic Church leader's interest in women. But the photo — all men and one woman — also was a glaring snapshot pointing up the lack of women leaders in the Catholic Church.

"I see progress," says Konwinski. "And I think with it lots of opportunity and challenges for women in the church. At the same time I think we need to be patient. Perhaps progress isn't as fast as we'd like it to be."

In the continuing war women have been waging to enter the job market in the United States, even those Christian churches who hold equality between the sexes as an ideal don't always practice what they preach, statistics show.

More than half, including the Catholic Church and the Grand Rapids-based Christian Reformed Church, still do not ordain women.

In those that do, the vast majority of women ministers are still associate pastors, sole pastors at smaller, rural congregations, teachers and missionaries. The job of senior pastor — a more prestigious position professionally — almost always falls to men, statistics show.

And yet the numbers are leaning toward the feminist cause. A study by the National Council of Churches showed the number of women ministers in America had doubled from 1977 to 1987, climbing from 10,470 to 20,730.

"We still have congregations that refuse to accept women," says the Rev. Sharon Rader, district superintendent for the local United Methodist Church. "But there are more and more congregations that understand that we make appointments without consideration of gender or race."

"It's a reality. Women are going to be ordained ministers."

The most inclusive denominations are still the more liberal bodies such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the United Methodist Church, the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), said Constant Jacquet, information associate for the NCC in New York.

Locally, the most inclusive denominations are the United Methodist and the Episcopalian churches. (see chart).

The CRC's sister church in Wet

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Sister Patrice Konwinski

Michigan, the Reformed Church in America, has been ordaining women for more than 10 years. But RCA statistics show an ongoing struggle to put women into the pulpit. Nationally, only 4.6 of the RCA's ordained ministers are women. In the Synod of Michigan, which includes Grand Rapids, that number is 9 percent.

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A young couple was standing outside the Rev. Dawn Boelkins' office at Christ Community Church, an RCA community in Spring Lake. They wanted to get married. The other minister, a man, wasn't available.

So, a church staffer asked: "Would you take a woman?"

In contrast, that morning, Boelkins had been with some elderly women who were making a quilt. As she left, one of them proudly pointed to her and said in sotto voce to a friend, "That's our minister."

On the balance it's been wonderful, Boelkins says, and comments that make her feel like an automobile option instead of a minister are rare. In fact, her gender almost never becomes an issue, the 34-year-old associate pastor says.

"I've landed in a wonderful community. I've been pleasantly surprised at how I've been received."

The next generation of boys and girls lining the church pews won't be so shocked by a feminine presence in the pulpit, Boelkins believes. And slowly, inevitably, people won't have to be asked if they'll "take a woman."

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Konwinski, whose primary business is financial administration and not theology, views her work as "a partnership with the ordained ministry" and not a subordinate role. The present pontiff is on record as a ready critic of discrimination

against women in society. In his 1988 apostolic letter, "On the Dignity of Women," the pope called for more respect for women and condemned sexual discrimination and domination of women as "sin."

But the pope's own critics — many in the United States — say he has been blind to the discrimination against women that's taking place right in his own church.

An increasing number of people in U.S. denominations view bans on ordaining women as outdated and culturally conditioned, not religiously dictated.

"For me it is sad," says Sister Jarrett DeWyse, director of ministry and mission for the Grand Rapids Dominican Sisters. "Maybe more sad than angry. I came out of 15, 20 years ago (following the Second Vatican Council) looking at the possibilities. As you live your life you see it's more sad."

In an equal-opportunity society like the United States, the Catholic Church's hierarchy — the most adamant hold-out on the question of allowing women into the ministry — is paddling upstream and feeling the pull of the current. The pope's insistence that the church "does not have the authority" to ordain women chafes against the sensibilities of many Catholic nuns and lay women who feel called to the priesthood.

The second draft of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' pastoral on women reaffirms the church's age-old stance against women as priests. The document, which acknowledges womens' an-

ger and pain, elicited more angry responses from women who feel they've waited too long to have a share in their church's sacramental and teaching authority.

"It makes me mad when I think about it," DeWyse says. "Why is it that the rest of us can be saying this for years and it's not going to happen until the bishops say it? Until men say it, women will not be heard."

Many in the Christian Reformed Church feel the same way. As the Rev. Melvin Hugen, professor at Calvin Theological seminary, put it: "Year after year women have to hear their own role discussed again at synod by all males. And that's a very painful process."

This year will be no exception. The Grand Rapids-based CRC will once again take up the issue of women in its church at its annual synod, beginning Tuesday on the campus of Calvin College.

Although most people don't believe the much-anticipated report from the church's "Committee to Study Headship" will settle the CRC's 20-year-old debate on the place of women in the denomination, it may move the argument from what has been for both sides a sometimes frustrating stagnation.